

confess I owe much to his merits . . . ; but
for the ten
pound he claims, it is not yet due, and I
think you may do
well to persuade him (as a friend) to put it
in the number
of his desperate debts, for 'tis a very
uncertain one/

With this reference to Temple's old wager
against her
constancy opens that correspondence,
containing some
eighty letters of hers and one of his, which
covers the
period of exactly two years and a day till the
lovers were
wed at Christmas, 1654. There are no more
delightful
letters in English. Love-letters—and indeed
letters in
general—are a province of literature for
which no spec-
tacted Aristotle has yet laid down the laws.
But we may
have views about them; as we shall see,
Dorothy herself
had. The writing of letters is an applied art
which turns
into a pure one, when they lose their original
purpose; the
readers for whom they are written come to
die, the matter
they express grows obsolete and
immaterial, and yet by
charm of manner alone they may still
enthral an eaves-
dropping public for which they were never
meant. The
embroidery preserves the dress, when the
stuff itself is
long threadbare with the years. True, the
subjects are not
always ephemeral; a Pliny may watch
Vesuvius engulfing
five cities, a Sevigne see Fouquet on his
trial. But these
are lucky chances; good letters remain
immortal though

they chronicle the smallest beer, and
describe merely the
visits of cousins and the maladies of aunts.
Nor is this
simply because time gives back with
interest the value it
at first takes away from little things, so that
hairpins grow
precious in a thousand years and we would
give its weight
in gold for a laundry-bill of Augustus; it is
because the
real interest of good letters is one that
years cannot
lessen—the attraction of human personality.
To preserve
the charm of some character with vivid
responses to life—
that is their achievement. A diary like
Pepys's may be